

Last exit for peace: the struggle for a Palestinian State has entered a new stage

Eberhard Rhein

Mahmoud Abbas was right. He had to go to New York and present his request for full UN membership, despite strong and shocking pressure from the USA and the 'West' not to do so, intimidation by Israel blocking the transfer of customs duties and warnings of unrest and bloodshed in Palestine. He has turned out to be a statesman in the tradition of Yasser Arafat and Yizhak Rabin, and has offered his people a new sense of pride and hope for the future. Having received standing ovations for his address to the General Assembly he can be assured of obtaining enhanced UN observer status as a non-member state. Indeed, 131 of the 193 UN members do back Palestinian UN membership.

But full UN membership is not around the corner as long as the USA is determined to block it; nor should it be the foremost priority for the Palestinian leadership in the near future. They should rather build on their newly acquired international prestige and assemble a coalition of friends willing and able to exert pressure on Israel to engage in *bona fide* negotiations on territory, which are a prerequisite for a viable Palestinian state and peace with Israel. Without a delimitation of borders along 1967 lines and appropriate water rights, which go along with the land, there will be no sustainable peace.

Only after Israel has made concessions on key territorial demands should the Palestinians give in to Israeli demands concerning recognition of a Jewish state, the maintenance of security forces, the return of refugees and Jerusalem. Indeed, the Palestinians should be under no illusions.

The price for an independent state will be extremely high. The Palestinians will have to pay for many opportunities lost in the past.

To obtain the mini-state that may emerge from the negotiations they are heavily dependent on the joint support of the USA, Russia, the EU and the UN, united in the so-called 'Quartet'. Without such support they will get nowhere!

A few days ago the Quartet submitted a proposal for re-launching direct negotiations between the two parties.

It sets a time limit within which to conclude negotiations – the end of 2012 – and proposes to start with the issues of borders and security. Within a month a preparatory committee is to meet to agree on an agenda and a method of proceeding. Even if this proposal does not contain a reference to a settlement freeze or the 1967 borders, the Palestinians should accept it. Otherwise Netanyahu could indeed claim to have offered his hand without obtaining a response.

Achieving a balanced outcome of the negotiations will require the direct involvement of the Quartet in nudging both sides to accept painful compromises. Israel will have to accept major concessions on land. It has to evacuate settlements, even in the face of violent resistance from their inhabitants. For those remaining, it will have to offer equivalent territory, without which Palestine will not be sustainable.

Israel will have to allow Palestinians to share roads, water and power facilities with settlers. Guaranteeing smooth co-existence between the settlers and the Palestinians will require precise rules and infinitely more mutual tolerance than can be seen today.

Contrary to Netanyahu's claim at the General Assembly, territory and borders remain the key issues for peace. Without enough territory – including a corridor between the West Bank and Gaza – and open access to Jordan and Egypt, a Palestinian state with some four million people is bound to suffocate and create economic and social unrest for Israel and the rest of the region.

Territory and borders will therefore be a test case of Israel's trustworthiness. There is no point in the Palestinians making any concessions to Israeli demands before having obtained credible Israeli commitments regarding the return of territory.

The issue of UN membership should be relegated to a secondary role. The UN Security Council handed the demand to its Membership Committee along with a request to examine whether Palestine fulfils the criteria for statehood, i.e. possession of a well-defined territory, a recognised government and a love of peace. The Committee is expected to report back very quickly so that the Security Council can make a decision regarding its recommendation to the UN General Assembly.

The optimal outcome would be a recommendation for enhanced observer status as a non-member state, which would grant the Palestinians access to specialised UN institutions, including the International Court of Justice. The four EU members of the Security Council (France, the UK, Germany and Portugal) should call for such an outcome to emerge speedily. And all 27 EU member states should support enhanced observer status in the UN General Assembly.

In any event, the UN show is just about over. Now is the time to build on success at the General Assembly and push ahead with negotiations on the ground.

That will require flexibility on both sides, and a lot of patient persuasion and pressure from Tony Blair and his colleagues in the Quartet.

Despite the almost insurmountable obstacles that lie in the way, this looks like the very last chance for Europe and the international community to make peace between Israel and Palestine.

It is therefore crucial for Israel, the Palestinians and the Quartet partners to weigh up the consequences of failure very carefully. If yet another Palestinian generation grows up under Israeli occupation and negotiators fail to finally create a viable Palestinian state, then radicalisation, violence and guerrilla operations will further weaken the Middle East.

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